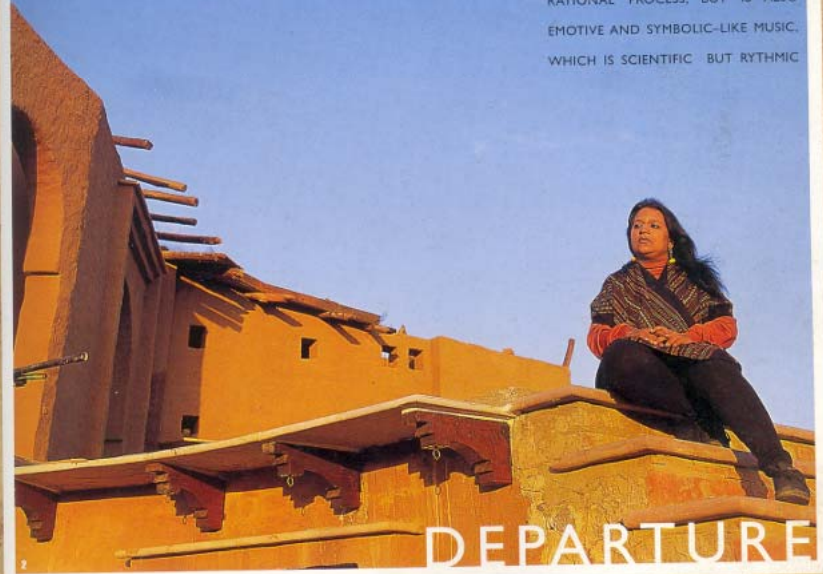


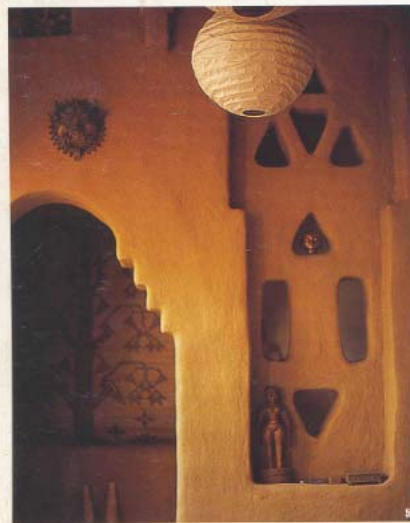
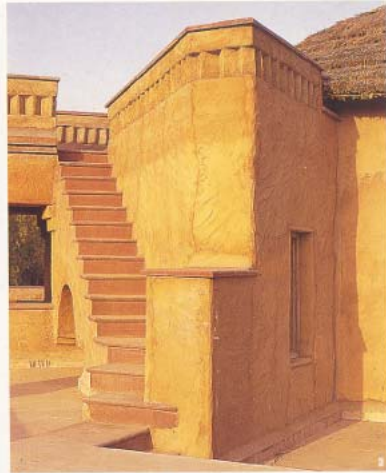


CONSTRUCTIVE

DESIGNER OF THE YEAR, REVATHI KAMATH, IS A PIONEER IN MUD ARCHITECTURE IN INDIA. PASSIONATE ABOUT THE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT, SHE IS COMMITTED TO MAKING HER OWN AND HER CLIENTS' LIFESTYLE TOTALLY ECOLOGICAL. SHE IS UNIQUE IN HER ABILITY TO INTEGRATE CONTEMPORARY NEEDS WITH TRADITION TO ENSURE CONTINUITY AND SENSITIVITY TO MAN AS A BEING AND TO COMMUNITIES AS ELEMENTS OF THE COSMIC WHOLE. HER ARCHITECTURE IS NOT ONLY A RATIONAL PROCESS, BUT IS ALSO EMOTIVE AND SYMBOLIC-LIKE MUSIC, WHICH IS SCIENTIFIC BUT RHYTHMIC.



DEPARTURE



I COME FROM AN essentially engineering family. Both my grandfathers were civil engineers. I was constantly exposed to discussions regarding architecture and building materials. This has had a major impact on me.

Since childhood I have been on construction sites and seen things come up from nothing. I would see these millions of labourers toiling away at huge masses of concrete which went up 200 feet, water gushing across spaces, massive generators churning electricity. It was very exciting.

At some of these sites I also saw the beauty of the rivers close by. I saw remote locales of the country where I met tribals, and spent my holidays in some backward village in Orissa making mud vessels.

Father was a Nehruvian socialist who had shed all associations with the village and its feudal aspects and gave his lands to those who were cultivating it. He said he was educated and could fend for himself with his mind. He could see the changing future and wanted to be part of the whole process.

Between seven and twelve years of age I lived in Bangalore with my retired maternal grandfather, who was a little angry (British). My grandmother was very traditional and I learnt a lot from her. My background enabled me to interact with the entire extended family, comprising people who were jet-setting around the globe. I understood the rhythms of life.

I could witness the process of people living simultaneously in different cultures and I've seen life enriched with that, not depleted by it. I've seen tradition continuing and I've seen modernisation—and it's not one at the cost of the other. My mother was very artistic, with a passion for nature—basically a homemaker with great depth—and was a major source of inspiration.

I learnt so much from my grandmother, mother and grandaunt. They were housewives, but on occasions would produce the most incredibly complex designs in rangoli. I wondered where it all came from. Their designs were like mandalas.

Mandalas—those magical diagrams, yantras, which

symbolise Hindu architecture and transcend all cultures. An example is Charles Correa and Japuri—he is heroic in his approach to architecture and he as a male can talk of mandalas. Why male? Because it's Vedic—vastupurusha-mandala. It precludes the woman, for the woman is no measure of civilisation and culture. A brahmin is the keeper of the shastras and a brahmin is male.

But at the real level, women have always represented the cosmos in their drawings, on the ground, on the wall, through participating in the actual act of building their homes. I related to the truth of the tradition around me which I found very rich and alive.

I saw the drawings, the mandalas, and I saw the complexity of their drawings, and I see the way in which all traditional architecture—whether it is the temple drawing or the town plan—is based on these drawings that women make. How then are women denied? It means that even if somebody denies it to you women have that consciousness—they can't be denied.

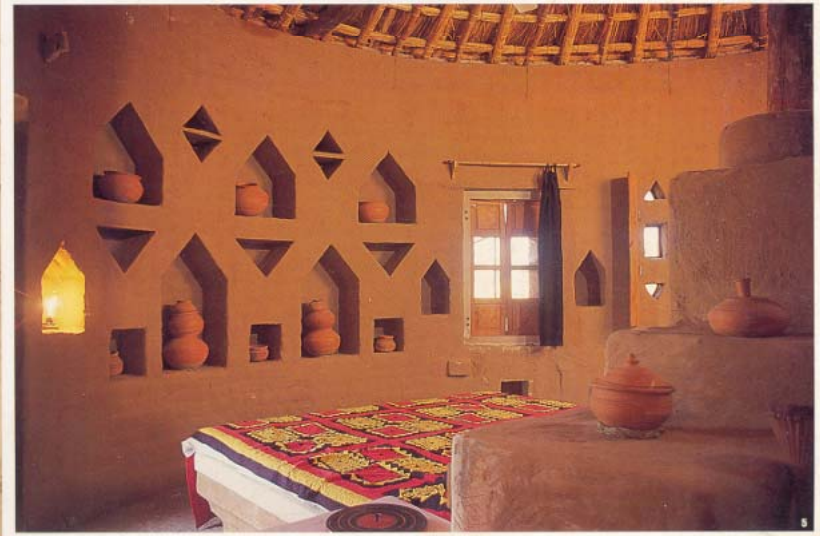
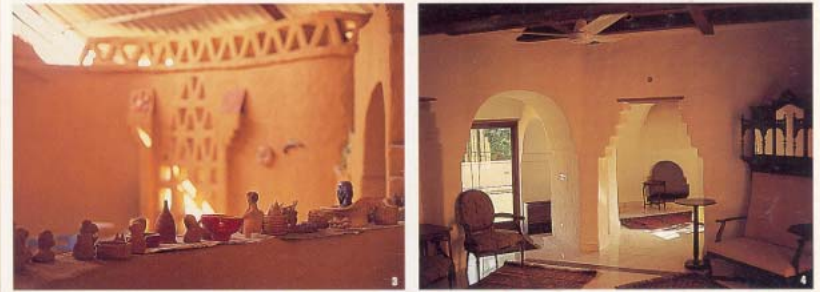
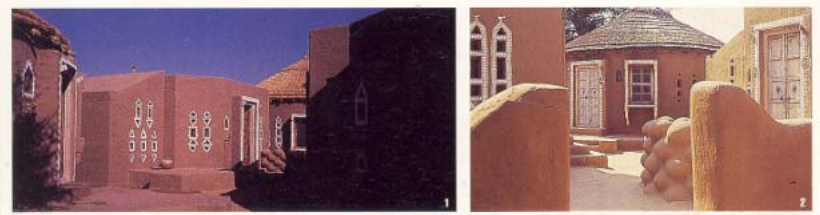
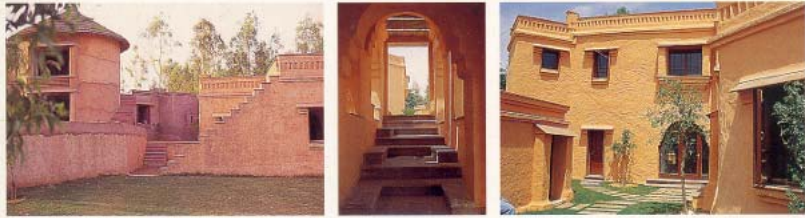
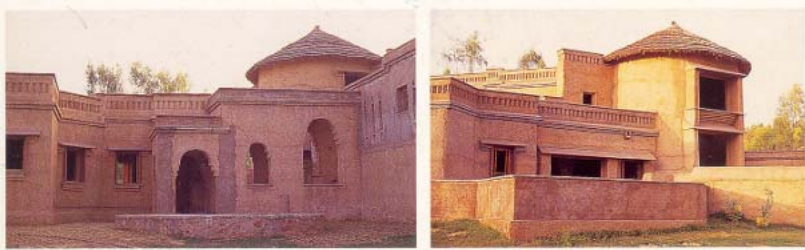
I'm not saying this in the sense of a western woman liberator. What I'm saying is that it's not only tradition that inspired me. The very fact that my parents were Nehruvian and that my father had two daughters who were always given freedom meant that I just grew up with these sensibilities and in this environment.

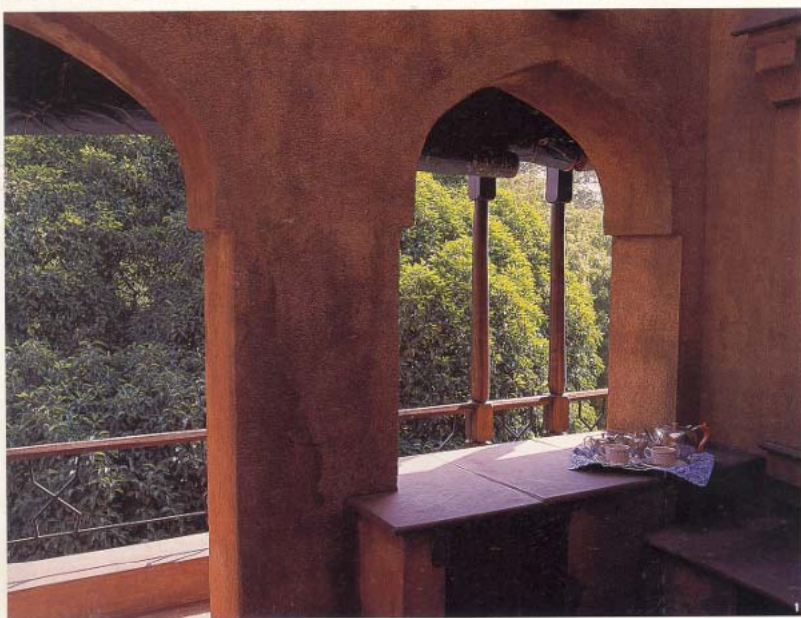
I was educated in Bangalore and Delhi and did my graduation from the School of Planning and Architecture, New Delhi. The nuns in school daubed my wickedness. I was not a rebel, but I did what I wanted to and the nuns let me, because I contributed to the system. The system recognised me as me. I have never been in awe of any system.

I was a prefect. I was serious, but also had fun. We had these jam sessions and I made these posters and I made these outlandish bellbottoms for myself—I loved to sew. And the system still accepted me, for I contributed to it. But I'm also sensitive to the system, I assimilate it.

For my postgraduation, I had my first quarrel with my father. Despite admissions into several fancy universities abroad I wanted to do my postgraduation in urban and regional planning. I wanted to use my entire energies at

PREVIOUS PAGE LEFT: Traditional designs painted around geometric punctuation in the wall serving as windows. **RIGHT:** Revathi Kamath on the site of her own farmhouse. 1. Women doing mud *ajrai* (plaster) in the tourist village in Mandawa. 2. Revathi takes inspiration from rangoli designs which reflect mandalas in their geometricity. 3. An in-process view of the Judge farmhouse. 4. Another innovative window design. 5. Mud is so 'intelligent' that it lends itself to any kind of interior decoration. 6. Mud can be moulded aesthetically and, far from the common belief, has a compressive strength which enables it to be used as a load-bearing element.





that point in trying to understand the environment I belonged to and wanted to work in. The environment is not just around me, I wanted it inside me, so that I could be spontaneous in my responses. I was not opposed to going abroad, certainly not. But I knew what I wanted.

Clarity came when I saw my *janadarni's jhuggi* (see-powomates shun dwelling). She had taken some old curtains from my mother and designed her *jhuggi*. It had won the best *jhuggi* award and I was touched by the beauty of her and her *jhuggi*. She was a very refined human being and I told my mother that I had never seen anything so wonderful. I cried when I saw the Taj Mahal, and I cried when I saw this space. One is not right and one is not wrong, so both have the power to move.

This power stayed with me. It didn't manifest itself immediately. Later, I saw Laurie Baker's work and I said, 'Oh my, this is it.' What are we struggling for? I don't agree with all of his work aesthetically, but relate it with the value system towards minimalism, towards material towards simplicity, etc. I could see the interrelationship between architecture and nature, between trend and modernity.

This was the time when my mind was becoming architectural. I loved it. Everything crystallised for me. We were on a study tour. Gerard da Cunha was with me. He said he wanted to work with Laurie Baker and I said I didn't want to because I don't believe in a set of formulas being repeated everywhere. I felt we must be more complex than that. I'm not evolving a production system. I'm not evolving a style. I must be able to relate to whatever the situation-as a woman that's very important. I want to be able to go somewhere and start from zilch, all over again, every time. I enjoy that.

Every time Laurie Baker came to Delhi, I'd go and sit there and just feel his presence. His being had an impact on me, but I can't say he's my *guru*, because I think, besides him, the *mistris* (skilled labour) have taught me a lot.

In college, I became aware of Vasant Kamath's presence. He was from Rugby and did his architecture from University College, London, and then decided to come to India. He didn't want to work in London or America. Romi Khosla, Narendra Dengle and he formed a group, trying to do projects relevant to the Indian context.

I did my architecture, but didn't enjoy flashiness. I enjoyed working intellectually and didn't find working in the normal architectural format particularly stimulating. I found the so-called 'super-rich' architecture cliched and dumb, dumb, dumb. I found modernism dumb. But plastic, formica and fake marble are pathetic materials. I like marble, granite and glass, depending on how it's used. I enjoy stimulating modern hi-tech achievement-but can that reach the people?

It may sound crazy, but I don't think this city (Delhi) can sustain itself. I'm not saying no to linkages, communication, trade or development. I'm saying no to the Coca Cola culture. It won't help us.

I'm not a politician, I'm not talking about housing the millions, I'm talking of a life that can sustain the remaining, help sustain craft and the poverty-stricken millions. You have to understand that for any paradigm of social order you have to be sensitised to the whole. You can't fragment it. It's very easy to reject. I'm not rejecting hi-tech. But I think it has not achieved a sustainable quality of life.

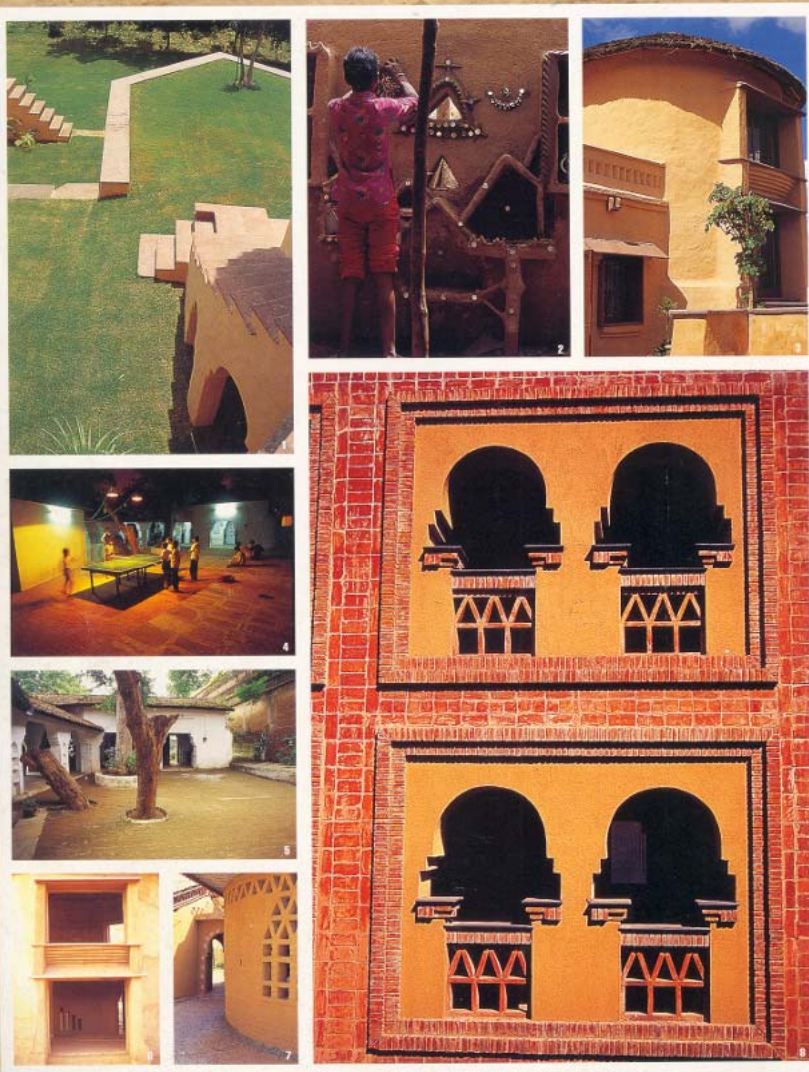
I love marble, but I don't go overboard using it. I use teak, but I ensure that my clients plant double the number of trees on their plots. I love science, but not if it contributes to the energy sink. If you are truly ecological, you are interested in survival. Therefore, if all my acts can be energised with this instinct, it's worthwhile.

Even in concrete architecture, there can be good work. I understand the problems of that material repeating itself stupidly, mindlessly. If you want to use it for a piece of art-very good. But if it becomes the norm, can it survive? When I say let's build with mud, it's my gesture at this point of time. It's symbolism and also a self-preservation of the species.

After I did my architecture I worked with Stein, Doshi and Bhatta for one-and-a-half years. I liked working with Stein. His approach was organic. I kept telling him I want to be ecological and he kept telling me he would put me on to some Himalayan project. But that was not it. I passionately felt about the poor person, who is my inspiration. With Stein I worked very hard and got my fundamentals correct, but I was dissatisfied.

One day I met Vasant in Khan Market and I asked

LEFT: The Judge farmhouse, which took four years to complete, was Revathi's proving ground. Her intensity, belief and hard work found solutions to all the problems of a new technique. Now the house sprawls aesthetically and harmoniously over the countryside outside Delhi, arousing academic as well as lay interest in its construction, layout and interiors. Cool in summer and warm in winter, a quality that mud is known to endow its constructions with, it is ideally suited to the site



him if I could work with him. Stein was angry, but I am the kind of person who has to do what I want to do. Vasant was doing exactly what I wanted to do. I found my platform to him. When I joined, his partnership company was going through a crisis. They all had differing views and visions. Vasant wanted to stay in India. At that time he was designing mobile creches for the poor and a school in Nagaland.

But he was not into mud. He was appropriate in the same manner as Laurie Baker was appropriate. I could relate with him. But because the partnership was a little disoriented, I couldn't work within the group. I designed the school for Vasant and took up my postgraduation in planning. Midway through my studies, Vasant and I got married. He was ten years older and he then or his own.

Meanwhile, my *jamadarni's* home was broken up and they were shunted out somewhere amidst appalling conditions. I was upset. What kind of city was this that couldn't integrate them? I began to think that all this architecture bit was nonsense. It's the planning discipline that's important. I wanted to understand the process.

During my postgraduation I took several liberties with my faculty. I told them I won't attend classes. I'll study on my own, submit all my papers on time. They agreed. Initially, I couldn't draw. I remember a project we had to submit where everyone was drafting away furiously. I told them that I wanted to talk about my project instead of presenting a drawing. I told them that they could give me provisional marks for it and at the end if I didn't produce drawings then they could fail me. They agreed. Nobody else took that risk. Everybody else conformed. Of course the system is responsive, if you approach it correctly and earnestly.

My first project was my Hindi tutor's house. I was in Third Year Architecture and this fellow had bought a small plot in Delhi Development Authority. He had taught me Hindi—or rather, hammered Hindi into me till the 12th standard. The project gave me great joy in the architectural sense. I had studied my steel and cement and I knew it. But, after it was over, I said 'What a box!' I was quite upset and told myself this won't do.

Later I was exposed to some good architecture. A five-star hotel and a tourist village in Srinagar. By then, I had

done planning and wanted to do something for the city.

I had done my thesis on Karol Bagh. I heard that Rajeev Sethi was trying to do something on community housing. There were some common links between us, so we kind of knew each other. I went along to these meetings and found them fantastic. There was nothing to them, really. There was this guy talking about puppeteers and making homes for them. It was like him talking and me finding my focus.

I decided to work on the project. There was no money in it. He said *The Times of India* was willing to fund it, so I pursued it and wrote out a project report. I ran from pillar to post to get that one lakh for one year. I produced this whole project on paper—Anandgram, in Shadigram Depot, Karol Bagh, Delhi. I created a settlement pattern for 600 families squatting there. I practically lived there, understanding communities, sub-communities and their psychology.

But it never took off. It was one of those projects which was physically possible, yet idealistic and fraught with politics. It meant giving power to the people. Then I realised that authorities were not interested in these people. These people would really have to fend for themselves for shelter. My *jamadarni* at least had a wall. These people had tattered cloth around them. To me, helping them was critical, but nobody was going to do anything about it. As a large system we are unresponsive.

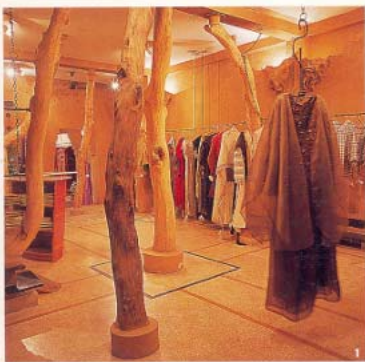
It led me to Gandhiji. I read more and more. Vasant, meanwhile, was working on trying to reduce costs. Every trick in the trade was tried, but costs wouldn't go down. There was no system that could respond to the kind of incomes people have and the fact that they need that roof, wall, planning—an architected home.

I travelled all over the country. So at one level, I was functioning, at another level, studying, planning, and at yet another level, confused, discontented, trying to find answers.

I realised if I had to think Mahatma Gandhi, then it had to be of benefit to the most deprived person. I began aiming my architecture not at the wealthy, for the wealthy, as the beginning of a practice, but right down there.

I did something here and something there. There was Rajeev Sethi and the settlement. After the completion of the school in Nagaland, (which people used to come

LEFT: 1. A side view of the Judge farmhouse. 2. Embellishing walls of the tourist village in Mandawa with the age-old traditions of local craft. 3. The Judge farmhouse. 4 & 5. A community centre built by Revathi near the entrance of the Maheshwar fort wall near Indore. 6. Graphic designs in mud. 7. A tourist village, Mandawa. 8. Savita Bhaswar's house outside Delhi. It is an experiment in a compromise between mud architecture and the usual steel-concrete-brick architecture.



50 kilometers to see and exclaim 'Ah! this is us.'). Vasant was assigned the cathedral. I helped him with some initial drawings.

Vasant and I believe in giving each other creative space. A human being is a sort of ideas in progression and if your ideas have appealed to somebody then you have the right to argue them, extend them and evolve.

At that time Aman Nath was into conservation. He took me to see a dilapidated *haveli* at Soni. He asked, 'Should we buy it?' 'It's fabulous, just buy it,' I told him. Everything was in a collapsed state. 'How will we put it together?' he asked. 'Don't worry, we'll sew it together,' I said.

Initially I worked with him. Took some engineers there and allowed them how to patch up the collapsed walls and roofs. I told him to use only timber. But somewhere down the line Aman decided to do it himself. Which was great, because I was not once to tear out old doors from some place in Shekhavati and stick them in Delhi. I believe in conservation and recycling, but I don't believe in destroying traditions and retrofitting for the sake of possession.

One day the *thakur* (feudal lord) of Shekhavati turned up to see Vasant. He had a two lakhs, or some such stupid budget, and wanted to build a hotel in Mandawa. Vasant said he was not interested and asked me if I was, I said yes. I already had a feeling for Shekhavati. I saw it as a place from where they were ripping out all these fabulous doors, *gharokas* and pillars and adorning Delhi homes with them.

I needed to build back the tradition of the place. I wanted to look at what the place had, what it would sustain and what continuity it would give, rather than make alien modern boxes for the natives, mutilating their sense of balance and cosmic perception with this style of modern architecture.

Earth was another mud obsession with me. When I started looking around me I found that 80 per cent of the population was living in mud. At the same time, at the Pompidou Centre in Paris, there was this exhibition on mud architecture. There were fabulous projects from Sudan and Mexico. Every culture in the world has a tradition of building in mud. The issue was what ties civilisations together. I loved the message

that came through the images in the brochure. It was poetry.

At the same time, I was invited to speak at some women's seminar in Australia—somewhere that Charles Correa, BV Doshi and David Dunster had been to before me. And here was a small nobody that someone like Brian Woodward came 200 kilometres to hear. Why? He wanted to hear women of the developing countries speak on architecture. Wow! What encouragement!

Brian Woodward said he lived in a teepee (wigwam) and was trying to build in mud and nothing was working out. Then I met another person called Archer trying to do mud buildings, but I saw they were ugly cottagey things in mud blocks with a GI roof over them.

I realised this was it. Mud. It's what we've been doing so beautifully all along. The world is holding seminars on it, publishing papers on it, and we are not even looking at it.

All this came together at Mandawa. I had them to take me for a ride through the town. Everywhere I went, I saw mud was used.

I read papers and added my technique to the knowledge of the lay *mistris*. The mud had to be analysed, the *putai* (plastering) technique perfected, a foundation laid.

"But how did you know that the structure would stay up, won't wash away, be safe, won't leak, be strong?"

"I had to take that risk. The fellow had no money."

"Do you mean that because you got a client with a limited budget he had no option but to accept the alternative you offered him? What if the structure had collapsed in the first rain?"

"Finished. But, frankly, why should it? I had taken all the technical precautions. And the fact was that we got the complete structure up in four months, before the rains. Once you have the roof, the foundations are fine."

"Suppose you remove the roof today—the foundation and walls will collapse?"

"Yes—not immediately, but slowly. But that's what I want. It's the whole concept and philosophy of mud architecture. After a while it can and should go back to earth and grow cabbages once again." (As told to Neeru Nanda)

PHOTOS: SAMAR S JODHA, VASANT KAMATH

PREVIOUS PAGE: LEFT: 1 & 3. *Utsav*—the designer store in Hauz Khas village, Delhi. 2. Mehola, a restaurant in Hauz Khas village. PREVIOUS PAGE: RIGHT: 1, 2, 3 & 5. A tourist village, Mandawa. 4. The Judge farmhouse. THIS PAGE: LEFT: Nalin Tomar's house is a dignified six-storeyed tower on a 40-square-yard plot. Built in pure brick, the structure has also 13-foot pillars which tie up in arches every now and then. It has double retaining walls which take the load. Revathi does not see interiors as a separate entity in the decoration process. She likes people to feel the interplay of light and space, each element responding to human movement

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INTERIORS

& L I F E S T Y L E I N D I A



EDWIN LUTYENS—VISIONARY WHO BUILT RASHTRAPATI BHAVAN PRITI PAUL—SINGLE IN LONDON REYATHI KAMATH—DESIGNER OF THE YEAR HARSH GOENKA—FAVOURITE CANVASES DEEPAK CHOPRA—DEMI MOORE'S GURU SIMI GAREWAL—PENTHOUSE CHIC